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ABSTRACT

This paper develops Lukacs's interpretations of Marx's historical dialectic, reification, and class consciousness and relates these elements to contemporary communication theory. For Lukacs, the core of Marx's writing is the historical dialectic, the most vital interaction of which is the relation between subject and object in the historical process. This subject/object relationship occurs only in the proletariat and involves reification, whereby the individual worker is "instrumentalized" and the object of the individual's work is "naturalized." Lukacs believes that reification creates only a minimal consciousness of alienation; so the next step is the development of a class struggle, in which many workers recognize their alienation and transmit this recognition to one another. Since there remains a possibility for the proletariat to develop class consciousness, this paper expresses the need for communication theory scholars to develop a clearer understanding of the history and role of the dialectical method, in order to develop some answers to the problems of dehumanization, alienation, and reification prevalent in Western culture today. The paper concludes that a reinterpretation of Lukacs's writings offers "building blocks" with which one might develop a method for predicting and analyzing human communication. (RL)

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GEORG LUKACS THEORY OF COMMUNICATION

A Paper
Presented to the 27th Annual Convention
of the
International Communication Association

PROGRAM:
The Influence of Marxian Perspectives on Human Communication

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THE COMMUNICATION THEORY OF GEORG LUKACS

Born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1885, Georg Lukacs displayed an interest in literature at an early age. In 1906, he obtained a doctorate in philosophy in Budapest, but his intellectual hunger continued after he had received his "terminal degree" so he attended lectures of the sociologist-philosopher Georg Simmel at Berlin University; in addition, during the years, 1913-1914, he became a member of the intellectual circle surrounding German sociologist Max Weber. The impact of the works of Georg Lukacs varies depending upon the critic. In an intellectual portrait of Lukacs, George Lichtheim called him "an important writer."[1] Perhaps, though, this is the bias of many biographers. Lukacs said of himself that he was "part of this 'pathetically grotesque' group of intellectuals."[2]

Essentially, Lukacs' work indicates that he was a man in search of himself. He wanted to be a revolutionary in a country without revolutionary fervor. He wanted to be a philosopher, but his central European background tended to thwart energies in that direction. He wanted to be an aesthete, but he apparently lacked the creativity. In a hostile work, Professor Victor Zitta claims that the man (Lukacs) had failed both as a poet and as a philosopher, thus he decided to become a literary critic and essayist. Zitta writes that Lukacs was "active in the domain of intellectual life where excellence does not necessarily bring fame and where creativity and significance do not come the easy way, where genius is muffed by the fact that it has to subordinate itself to commentary and analysis."[3]

Yet it was in the roles of critic and essayist that Lukacs found success. Although he attempted to participate in politics at the party level and in the government (as Deputy Commissar and as Commissar for Education), his activities in politics were little more than cursory. As an aesthete, his contributions would have to be considered negligible when compared with other Marxist writers, such as Bertholt Brecht and Thomas Mann.[4]

There are available, then, both positive and negative evaluations of the contributions of Georg Lukacs. Probably his most significant contribution, however, was the writing of History and Class Consciousness. In the preface of that book Lukacs states that his goal is to present "an interpretation, an exposition of Marx's theory as Marx understood it."[5] This task certainly would be a monumental one, yet Lukacs adds: "Marx's warning not to treat Hegel as a 'dead dog' has gone unheeded even by many good Marxists."[6] It is here that we find the essence of the contribution of Lukacs: he placed Hegel back into Marxism. We must remember, however, that Lukacs repudiated the contribution later when he sacrificed "intellectual integrity on the alter of party solidarity."[7]

The central focus of this paper will be to develop three elements in the work of Lukacs: dialectic, reification, and class consciousness and their relationships to contemporary communication theory.[8]

The Dialectic

For Lukacs, the core of Marx's writing was in his method. Writes Lukacs:

> Let us assume for the sake of argument that recent research had disproved once and for all every one

> of Marx's individual theses. Even if this were to be proved, every serious 'orthodox' Marxist would still be able to accept all such modern findings without reservation and hence dismiss all of Marx's theses in toto--without having to renounce his orthodoxy for a single moment. Othodox Marxism, therefore, does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx's investigations. It is not the 'belief' in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a sacred book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to method.[9]

The method to which Lukacs refers is obviously the historical dialectic. This dialectic's most vital interaction is "the relation between subject and object in the historical process."[10] The central problem for this dialectic is to change reality.

To develope this method, as with any method, one must first begin with facts. The social scientist, however, must discover his data differently from his physical and biological counterpart. Facts must be developed in totality from history, not from the compartmentalization of variables.[11] "Concrete reality is, therefore, the category that governs reality." Reality is a process, ever-changing, a totality, a social process.

The underlying premise of the dialectic is: "'It is not men's consciousness that dtermines their existance, but on the contrary, their social existance that determines their consciousness.'"[12] Only through capitalism did consciousness ever become possible. In this process, the proletariat became "at the same time the subject and object of its own knowledge."[13] Because economic circumstances created the proletariat, it is only through a knowledge of the historical process[14] that the proletariat can give direction to any action it may take.

The first premise of the dialectic is that history is comprised of subjects and objects; and this combination posits a totality.

Second, this totality can be understood only by object-subjects.

Third, there is but one group in capitalistic society that can be object-subjects--the proletariat.

Fourth, the proletariat must be aware of a second dialectical relationship in the philosophy of history.[15] This is the dialectic of theory and praxis.

Fifth, through the development of reification and eventually class consciousness, the proletariat is to be able to determine the proper approach to the theory-praxis dialectic and ultimately to grasp the "moment" for class conflict.

Reification

Those of us in the field on communication should recognize reification in its simplest form from the theory of Alfred Korzybski, and others.[16] The general semanticists tell us that "The word is not the thing." Contemporary

researchers warn us that assuming that the "word is the thing" will lead to breakdowns and problems in communication. In fact, making such an invalid assumption may even cause "mental illness" or "irresponsibility" if there are such "things."[17]

Andrew Arato, writing on Lukacs theory of reification, defines the term as "the phenomenon (and resulting phenomena) of a 'definite social relation between men' appearing /emerging and seeming/ in the form of a 'relation between things.'"[18] We believe this definition is consistent with both the general semanticists' concept and with Karl Marx's "alienation."

It was Lukacs contention that 19th century Marxism could not transcend reification since it treated the social world as "a second nature."[19] Because of material relations between persons (as in a consumer relationship) social relations also became simple commodity exchanges. As one can easily see the consciousness of the slave was reduced historically to "thinghood."[20] The slave became a thing--an instrument or tool for use by the master.

Instead of human beings beoming "things" as a result of their work, Hegel (and Lukacs) suggest that a reverse process should occur. The "imparting of human forms to objects" should make the objects recognizable as having human qualities. In developing his approach to reification, Lukacs was never criticized by his hostile critics (neither the Stalinists nor the bourgeois). Lukacs' originality in this realm lies in his bringing together Marx's critique of the political economy and the development of Western rationality from Weber.[21]

The dialectic of reification is first concerned with the economic category. Here we must distinguish between abstract and concrete categories. These categories have dialectical relationships depending on whether one is concerned with thought or with reality (see Figure 1).

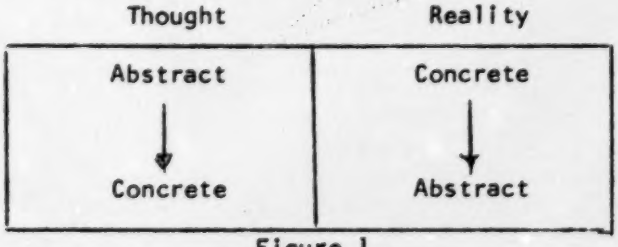

Figure 1.

In thought, the abstract is the beginning followed by the concrete; but in reality the concrete is the beginning point and the abstract is the result.

The "second nature of appearances" is presented in a "moment of recognition."[22]

The next stage in this development is the "moment of overcoming."[23] From Marx's commodity fetishism, Lukacs found that labor power and the result of labor power both became commodities. This commodification from an objective view means the "creation of a second nature of pseudo-things;" from a subjective view-point human beings are forced to face their activities within this second nature.[24] In this way, labor power becomes a quantitative

item--a commodity. In this way the object of production becomes merely a part--a piece--in the totality, and the subject of production becomes even more fragmented. Lukacs suggests that this fragmentation of the worker in the work process results in the worker's having a passive and mechanical attitude toward the object of production and toward his own work. This results in the workers' being isolated from one another. This alienating system, argues Lukacs, is at the center of scientific study as well. An example is found in the fragmentation of the social sciences, and the methods through which social sciences fragment reality.[25] Thus, in the capitalistic process, reification takes two forms: (1) the individual worker is instrumentalized; and (2) the object of the individual's work is naturalized. This reification process certainly can account for the notion we know as alienation.

It should be pointed out at this juncture that the overcoming of reification may not necessarily mean the overcoming of "our technological mastery of nature" or of the "objectivity of nature."[26] Instead, the objectivity of nature could be seen at various levels; thus it would become, if you will, a more "subjective" objective nature. We would see nature at various levels. The type of reification that would be most easily overcome would be the relationship of human-to-human.[27] The price we must pay for this overcoming, Arato says, is human activity, praxis.[28] Lukacs' method here moves from the object (contemplation) to subject (activity) and finally to the "levels of subject-object interaction."[29]

Although Lukacs is concerned with a subjective dialectic of reification, we can discuss the subjective and objective aspects of this dialectic. At the first level, we assume that all of reality is contemplation; this is the objective side. Lukacs contended, however, that one could not arrive at the subject-object interaction by way of assuming philosophy (as did Hegel) to be objective. Instead, we must find a subject-object in the same location.[30] By critiquing German philosophy, Lukacs arrived at the same conclusion as did Marx through a different route.[31] Success is found in the proletariat, the identical subject-object of the historical process. Thus, the first dialectic involves the subject-object of the investigation, the proletariat. The second dialectic is that of mediation, the objective historical process. It should be noted at this point that this notion of Lukacs' has been criticized by Habermas for its creating of objective necessity as opposed to an objective possibility; that is, Habermas claims that Lukacs' position is deterministic.[32] Lukacs' notion still has some value, depending on how one interprets his mediation process.

If the proletariat has a "glimpse" of the meaning of history, what value is it? Writes Lukacs: "'In the first instance' nothing at all."[33] This is not to say, however, that the proletariat and the bourgeois would gain the the same meaning. However, two other forces would have to be exerted for any meaningful change to take place: the collapse of capitalism and a voluntary agent's intervention near the end of such a collapse.[34] It is important to remember that the proletariat has been moved to a position of object by the consciousness of the bourgoisie and only through becoming objectified can the proletariat ever act as this voluntary agent--thus, the objective possibility. This objectivication is the beginning point, a minimal consciousness of alienation.

In the final analysis, then, reification is a step taken first by individual members of the proletariat. This step is an "objective possibility." Lukacs realized, however, that this step would create only a minimal consciousness of alienation. Thus, the next step was the development of a class struggle. So that many of the workers had to recognize their alienation and had to transmit this recognition to one another. Even this class consciousness, however, would appear only as a moment of revolutionary praxis.[35]

Class Consciousness

According to G. H. R. Parkinson, the "objective possibility" is at the core of Lukacs' consciousness. Parkinson emphasizes that in this view, class consciousness "is not the sum, or even the average, of what the individual members of a class think, feel, etc.; it is what they would do in a situation of a certain type, if they were to grasp that situation properly."[36] Consciousness is based upon totality and dialectical relationship between theory and practice. As has been stated only the proletariat is capable of grasping class consciousness, and to assert itself in the class struggle the proletariat must grasp its self-knowledge.

Writes Lukacs, "Now class consciousness consists in the fact of the appropriate and rational reactions 'imputed'. . .to a particular typical position in the process of production."[37] Consciousness is not, then, reducible to sums, averages, or psychological states of given individuals. The proletariat needs a holistic, practical analysis of the historical function of class in society.[38]

One might ask the question: How does false consciousness occur? It may occur either in objectives chosen or in terms of action. Lukacs relates the example of the petty bourgoisie. He indicates that this class is exposed to the influence of capitalism and yet is unaffected by the fact of class conflict between the proletariat and the bourgoisie. Lukacs quotes Marx stating that as a transition class, the petty bourgois will "imagine itself to be above all class antagonisms."[39] Thus, the petty bourgois will not take an active part in any class struggle; neither will the peasants unless there is some type of external upheaval.[40] The bourgoisie cannot accept consciousness because it would spell ruination for the entire group. False consciousness arises out of self-interest (as in the case of the bourgoisie), selective perception (as with the petty bourgoisie), or through the lack of organization (as with disparate sectors of peasants). Thus, the only class capable of class consciousness is the proletariat, and the only appropriate time for such an occurrence is during a capitalistic period.

Consciousness is expressed "as the irreconcilable antagonism between ideology and economic base."[41] To make a reconciliation or perhaps "to cover up", the bourgoisie developed a coherent theory of economics, politics and society. It is the job of a class conscious proletariat to uncover the contradictions through an understanding of history. Thus, consciousness is an awareness of the historical role of class.

Lukacs stated that "Man is subject in a world of objects, and everything that attests to his creative power is a step toward that complete

self-determination which Marx calls freedom."[42] This achievement can occur only through a holistic approach combining philosophy and aesthetics in a meaningful new conceptualization of history. In the final analysis, then, "the whole of history has to be rewritten; the events of the past have to be sorted, arranged and judged from the point of view of historical materialism."[43]

Communication Theory

Today, the objective possibility of class consciousness remains. The question arises how this concept may fit into contemporary communication theory. Let us look at some of the systems through which we may arrive at conclusions. In Western society these have been three. They are induction, deduction and the dialectic. While we know that each of these methods has its place, the dialectical system has been used only sparingly.[44] Scholars of communication theory need to develop a clearer understanding of the history and role of the dialectical method in the analysis of invention.

Only through this first clarification can we begin to develop some answers to the problems of dehumanization, alienation and reification prevalent in Western culture today. There are some promising signals in this direction. Sennet and Cobb's The Hidden Injuries of Class illustrates some of the fundamental psycho-sociological injury inherent in our class system.[45] Key's Subliminal Seduction opens our awareness of technology as a factor in dehumanizing our communication abilities.[46] Works such as these and those of Ernest Becker bring us to a clearer understanding of the natural-technological undercurrents that affect our social systems and ultimately humanity in general.[47]

Lukacs' conceptualization of reification and class consciousness may also fit with other contemporary analyses of communicative behavior. The symbolic interactionist, for instance, may find the concept of reification helpful in explaining behavior from this perspective. As Hubert Blumer[48] notes, "The first premise /of symbolic interaction/ is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them."[49] More importantly, however, is the second premise whereby "the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows."[50] Taking the second premise as an extension of the first we can make a case whereby reification, as defined here, offers an interpretation of that action and class consciousness an explanation of how man derives the "meaning of such things." Since meanings are the product of social interactions, Lukacs' contribution to the symbolic interactionist would further specify how the antecedents (i.e., the dialectic) and the degree of reification and class consciousness affect the behavior of the individual.

Closely aligned to this reinterpretation of contemporary approaches to communication theory via Lukacs would be role theory. In this case one might predict that the strain toward consistency or adjustment within the role is a function of reification and, further, that role expectations are governed by the individual's understanding (grasp) of class consciousness. From such an interpretation one might predict that given the individual's totality (social consciousness), his understanding of reification

and awareness of class consciousness the individual will adopt certain specific role expectations and interactions will be governed from those expectations.

Other approaches to communication similarily can be reinterpreted from Lukacs' view. Given that we can specify the relation of subject and object within the history of the interaction, the relation between "things" emerging from the dialectic and grasp the class consciousness held by the individuals within the interaction, we can predict the communicative behaviors of each. What Lukacs offers us that other historical methods do not in studying communication is the ability to predict future behavior and events. Based on the dialectic we can specify the antecedent conditions necessary for the behavior to take place and, by specification of the development of reification and the degree of class consciousness, predict differing outcomes dependent upon these three conditions.

Conclusion

In this paper we have attempted to explicate the communication theory of Georg Lukacs. From a reinterpretation of his writings we have offered "building blocks" with which one might develop a method for predicting and analyzing human communication. This method, we believe, offers a potential alternative explanation to the analysis of human communicative behavior predicated upon the dialectical nature of man and his social interactions.

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